

## Iraq Local Governance Program

### Civil Society Development: Learning from Ninawa

*During Saddam Hussein's regime, civil society organizations (CSOs) outside the Ba'ath Party were not allowed to operate as independent voices for citizens. Yet for democracy to take hold and bloom, CSOs must be developed and fostered. Although the Local Governance Program (LGP) focused primarily on assisting local government, the program also supported "grassroots" CSOs by building citizens' capacity to interact with their government to facilitate the transition to more democratic governance.*

One of the objectives of the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was to lay the foundation and provide guidance for an open and democratic society in Iraq. To meet this objective, the LGP focused its efforts on public sector governance institutions at the subnational level, but at the same time, it recognized that effective local governance requires citizens and governments to interact with each other in new ways. Consequently, the LGP developed and initiated a CSO-strengthening program. Under previous regimes, Iraq had lacked subnational governments with independent authorities and power. In addition, the civilian population was socially fragmented and severely repressed after decades of mistreatment at the hands of a brutal regime.

After the end of the formal conflict, those involved in the reconstruction effort faced the challenge of building a civil society in a setting where people had little experience with democratic participation and where the legacy of decades of Ba'ath Party

control over the daily lives of citizens meant that citizens avoided questioning governmental decisions and were reluctant to engage in collective action. Within this context, the LGP sought to identify and support nascent CSOs that had the potential to develop into effective interest groups and that could advocate for accountable government and democratic reforms. This brief describes the launch of the LGP's support initiative for CSOs in Ninawa Governorate and presents several lessons from that experience.

#### Designing the civil society support program

Saddam Hussein's regime had maintained control over CSOs that are normally independent entities in other countries. The Ba'ath Party had formed unions representing every occupation, e.g., the Lawyers' Association, the Iraqi Nurses' Association, the Iraqi Engineering Union, the Iraqi Teachers' Union, and the Iraqi Women's Federation. These organizations functioned as extensions of the Ba'ath Party and were established mainly to gather information about people in their communities. Consequently, they were largely detested and feared by ordinary citizens. In reality, true civil society groups were absent or operated underground. The situation in the North region was different, however. Since 1992, the three governorates of Arbil, As Sulaymaniyah, and Dahuk (Kurdistan) had been operating as an autonomous region and had established several independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Throughout the rest of the country, only certain Islamic religious groups had been able to remain truly separate from the regime, and this separation came at the very high cost of persecution of many of their leaders and restrictions on their religious practices.

The transition in Iraq was so sudden and abrupt—regime change by military intervention—that CSOs had no time to develop gradually. In most countries, such transitions take place over an extended period of time, and the gradual weakening of a regime's

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)/ Iraq LGP, implemented by RTI International,\* provided training, technical assistance, and other resources that included small grants to establish and strengthen local administrations, civic institutions, and processes in order to establish, develop, and strengthen a participatory, democratic, subnational government that delivers effective and efficient services to Iraqis. The LGP responded to specific challenges faced by subnational governments, democratic institutions and processes, and CSOs. The program sought to empower individuals and civic groups to have a say in setting local social and economic development and investment priorities through democratic participation and interactions with local government leaders. The LGP began in April 2003 and ended in May 2005.

\*RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.

grip enables CSOs to learn slowly to take a more active public role. This type of gradual change was not the case in Iraq. Following the overthrow of the previous Iraqi regime, a number of informal groups interested in public issues, e.g., human rights and women's rights, began to emerge at the local level. The LGP worked with these emerging groups throughout the country.

In June 2003, when the LGP team deployed in Al Mawsil, the capital of Ninawa Governorate, the team encountered many nascent CSOs that were eager to see what civic activism could now achieve under less restrictive conditions. Most of these organizations were very loosely organized and had little or no prior experience with collective action. Typically, they consisted of a few courageous men or women who had decided to try to do something positive for their communities.

One of the LGP's first tasks, to determine the number and categories of CSOs that existed in Ninawa, involved conducting a survey for the governorate. The LGP set out to commission the University of Al Mawsil's Sociology Department to conduct this survey. The university's research team, consisting of six members (two women and four men), traveled throughout Ninawa to collect the data. After 6 weeks of research, the team presented the LGP with a directory of 76 CSOs. This directory revealed that the majority of CSOs existing in Ninawa at that time were remnants of the Saddam Hussein-era unions, syndicates, and federations, with the second largest of these groups consisting of ethnic- and religious-based humanitarian organizations, and the smallest category comprising newly formed human rights groups and one women's organization.

All of these CSOs lacked the funds to establish an office from which to operate, had gaps in their management capacities, and lacked the knowledge to be effective advocates for democratic rights. Moreover, their understanding of civil society was skewed by the many years of Ba'athist propaganda. The CSOs specifically required support in the areas of basic organizational and management practices, program development, networking, and lobbying and advocacy.

To provide the most effective and efficient aid to CSOs, the Ninawa LGP team implemented a procedure whereby they (1) prioritized the category of CSOs they needed to assist;<sup>1</sup> (2) identified 14 CSOs to receive LGP assistance; (3) recruited and hired local staff to work with the selected CSOs; (4) produced a set of training materials in both Arabic and Kurdish; (5) developed a rapid-response grants (RRGs) program to assist the selected CSOs; and (6) invited these 14 CSOs to meet with the LGP civil society team at the LGP office in Al Mawsil.

<sup>1</sup> To comply with the LGP's objectives and USAID's intent, the team gave preference to women's groups and other underrepresented groups. Women's groups were becoming quite active and were advocating for a heavily underrepresented part of Iraqi society that deserved a greater role in a more democratic Iraq.

## Launching the civil society organizations development program

Throughout Iraq, LGP teams worked with and supported various types of CSOs to foster political participation and engage citizens in democratic dialogue that promoted understanding of federalism, decentralization, democratic rights and responsibilities, nonviolent conflict resolution, and local authorities' accountability for local service delivery. LGP support included the provision of grants for building renovation and repairs, office furniture and equipment, Internet connections, and computers. The Ninawa LGP team developed and provided RRGs to assist the selected CSOs. In total, 14 CSOs received technical assistance and training. The availability of RRGs was critical to providing vital basic financial support to the CSOs on a timely basis, in addition to refurbishing their office facilities.

The LGP civil society team in Ninawa held individual consultation sessions with the 14 selected CSOs. The LGP team reviewed the organizations' bylaws, assisted with work plans and program ideas, and trained members in proposal writing skills. The team provided basic operational assistance to address such skills as conducting meetings, setting agendas, agreeing on task assignments, and taking minutes of meetings and recording decisions. The LGP team also developed and distributed a concise CSO Handbook—translated into Arabic and Kurdish—that covered essential topics for new CSOs. The handbook addressed the most salient tasks, such as

- Defining a CSO,
- Writing a mission statement,
- Developing objectives and goals,
- Creating institutional bylaws,
- Writing a proposal, and
- Fundraising.

Over the course of the first year, the LGP also produced three more comprehensive manuals for CSO capacity building. These manuals covered the topics of human resources management, outreach and membership development, and financial management.

Because many of the 14 CSOs in Al Mawsil lacked an office and the space to hold large meetings, the LGP invited these CSOs to use the program's conference rooms for coordination meetings. The senior LGP civil society specialist facilitated these meetings, which were held regularly on the second Thursday of every month. In addition to supporting the coordination meetings between the various CSOs, the LGP also coordinated and facilitated meetings between the 14 CSOs and the Human Rights Committee of the Ninawa Governorate Council. These practices helped solidify a relationship of trust between LGP staff members and the community. They also provided practical opportunities to train local staff on public speaking, meeting management, and conflict resolution.

The CSOs in Al Mawsil were eager to learn about their rights and how to protect and advocate for their causes. Given the temporary authority of the CPA and the transitional governing bodies, most of the CSOs' questions could not be answered definitively. The LGP sought to prepare Iraqis to play an active role in citizenship and lay the foundation for civil society advocacy. These capacities would help local communities engage with government for a democratic future. To accomplish this, the LGP began offering a 3-day training workshop on advocacy in mid-February 2004 that was conducted entirely by local project staff. The workshop proved to be successful and was welcomed in

Al Mawsil by the participating CSOs. In response to popular demand, the LGP continued to offer the advocacy workshop twice a month to meet all the requests from across the governorate. The local LGP staff in Al Mawsil also traveled to Arbil and Kirkuk to offer training to the LGP's local staff in those cities and to conduct preliminary training sessions for emerging CSOs.

The description below summarizes the LGP's work with one specific CSO in Al Mawsil. This CSO, the Women's Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil, epitomizes the emerging spirit of civil society in Iraq and serves as an example for developing CSOs.

### *The Women's Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil*

Founded in July 2003, the Women's Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil (women's society) has 150 members that represent various ethnic, religious, and professional affiliations. Cooperation among ethnic and religious groups is important for a city like Al Mawsil and for Ninawa Governorate, where Arabs, Kurds, Turkomen, Muslims, Christians, and Yezidis have lived together for years. (During the latter part of the rule of the Ba'athist regime, these groups had become extremely divided.) The Women's Society of Al Mawsil is concerned with women's social and educational rights and strives to develop women's educational, social, and administrative skills. The women's society relies on basic human rights principles as a foundation for its work and on Iraq's achievements throughout history as its inspiration.

In assisting this organization, the LGP worked with some of the most inspiring women in Iraq. The women's determination never faltered in the face of hostility from the community and serious threats to their office and well-being. One of the major issues for the women's society was its need to represent the women from Ninawa in the political and social debates taking place throughout the country. The women's society was adamant about representing its needs and expectations in the debates, because most of these events involved women's groups sponsored by political and religious parties and groups, mainly from Baghdad.

The LGP assisted the Women's Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil on two occasions in achieving its goal of being heard. The LGP sponsored the women's society so members could attend both the National Constitutional Conference and the Iraqi Women's National Conference, held in Baghdad in the latter part of 2003 and early 2004, respectively. The members' attendance placed the Women's Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil on the map and gave members a major boost of confidence and encouragement, because subsequently, many other women's groups around the country began corresponding with them.

The LGP continued to support the women's society by giving it a grant to establish an office and acquire furniture and computer equipment. The women's society strove to raise public awareness about the role of

women in Iraq, specifically in Al Mawsil. Various members conducted research and field studies that addressed such topics as women's and children's issues, domestic violence, gender issues, and the concerns of widows in a paternalistic society. In addition, society members' activities included educational courses on various subjects, including history, social science, music, literature, and health, as well as symposiums on the social, administrative, and legal issues affecting women and children. The women's society offered vocational training programs to build women's skills and to give them new economic opportunities in handicrafts, languages, computer usage, and administrative work.

During the course of the LGP's work in Al Mawsil, the women's society blossomed and increased its membership. Most of the women who participated in the free courses were elderly mothers and grandmothers who were illiterate, but who walked arduous miles twice a week to bring their young daughters or granddaughters to take computer classes at the women's society office in downtown Al Mawsil.

By late October 2003, the growing achievements of the Women's Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil had caught the attention of the CPA coordinator for Ninawa Governorate, who recommended the women's society to a delegation of female U.S. senators visiting Al Mawsil. The LGP was asked to coordinate an event and worked with the women's society to help members prepare a presentation for the visiting U.S. delegation. The presentation was a success. The head of the U.S. delegation asked several questions, including one about the form of assistance that Iraqi women would want from female U.S. senators. The president of the women's society presented an immediate, eloquent response: she asked for assistance in helping Iraqi women gain political offices in the national government and for more opportunities to participate in the local governing councils. This historic meeting helped apply pressure to the Ninawa Governorate Council to allow women to participate as equal members. In fact, the president of the Women's Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil served as one of the four women elected to the council.

### *The civil society organization development program results*

In repressed countries, civil society development requires years of work in order to yield results. However, in its effort to quickly initiate and expedite civil society development in Iraq, the LGP needed to take an opportunistic but practical approach by emphasizing breadth over depth. It identified certain CSOs that it believed the local authorities should work with and that could hold the local authorities accountable in a new, democratic sense. Once identified, LGP enabled these groups to be more visible and active. The LGP favored giving the new CSOs opportunities that linked them with the work of their local governments, but this was not uniformly possible. Because the LGP started with Iraqi CSOs in the “embryonic” stage, it seemed more effective to have these organizations pursue their own agendas independently, while developing their capacities with LGP assistance.

The LGP’s early civil society development work was a success. In the short-term, it provided avenues of expression and action for citizens’ groups for the first time since the previous regime’s overthrow. As operating conditions—especially the deteriorating security situation—became more difficult, the LGP was forced to consider a short-term outlook for its work programs. Depending on the circumstances, the LGP hoped to deliver results within the first 6 to 12 months of the program—results that would extend beyond initiating desired program activities. The goal was to pave the way for longer term, more sustainable programming to take place once the reconstruction environment had stabilized.

In spite of the difficult security situation that had gripped Al Mawsil since late 2003, the LGP civil society team was able to assist 14 CSOs in Ninawa Governorate. It also trained five local Iraqi staff to work with CSOs and conduct capacity-building workshops as required by its contract.

Al Mawsil is a socially conservative city with many pockets of violent insurgency. Yet the LGP’s support to the Women’s Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil enabled the women’s society’s president to achieve sufficient stature to be elected to serve on the Ninawa Governorate Council. In the face of great adversity and danger, this women’s CSO stands out for its courage and determination to build a brighter future for women in Iraq. Its achievements reveal the potential for women to contribute to Iraq’s future development, although the social forces at play in Al Mawsil and the rest of Iraq today cast uncertainty on women’s continued ability to make such contributions.

### **Lessons**

Among the many difficulties Iraqis are facing after the war is the challenge of rebuilding and maintaining social cohesion and trust as the country transitions from autocratic rule to more open, participatory, and democratic governance. The LGP’s support to Iraqi CSOs has helped citizens take steps toward fostering an open society. In the second year of the program, the LGP’s work plan shifted from providing broad support for CSO capacity

building to strengthening those CSOs’ ability to advocate for improved governance. Several lessons emerged from the LGP’s work in Ninawa Governorate and elsewhere in Iraq.

### *Understanding the nature of civil society and assessing potential partners is key to successful CSO strengthening*

Each country has a specific history and characteristics that shape the nature, capacities, and potential of civil society and that need to be understood if capacity-building assistance is to prove effective. By taking inventory and assessing the status of CSO development prior to delivering support, the LGP was able to more easily select specific CSOs to receive LGP support, which would help them effectively foster participatory, democratic governance. Engaging the University of Al Mawsil’s Sociology Department enabled the LGP to obtain an accurate inventory of existing CSOs and created a partner for future cooperation. Similar partnerships with universities in other areas of the country have also proven to be very productive.

### *Using local staff to deliver training and technical assistance to CSOs built local capacity and ensured effective delivery of the assistance provided*

The LGP’s local staff played a vital role in ensuring the success of the program and served as an important asset to the LGP civil society program in Al Mawsil. Motivated and capable, Iraqis have been a good resource for the LGP and for local capacity development. These staff interacted effectively with a wide range of CSOs, built trust and confidence, and tailored the technical assistance tools and approaches to the Iraqi context. Even when the expatriate LGP staff were evacuated to Dahuk in November 2003 (because of security threats), the LGP’s local staff continued to provide technical assistance and training to the selected CSOs. In addition, when the Democracy Dialogue Activity (DDA) program was launched in January 2004, the LGP local staff were able to introduce the program in Al Mawsil. The staff organized and facilitated DDA events throughout Ninawa until the DDA program ended in November 2004.

### *Gaining recognition through national events was critical for activism and networking*

The LGP used national events to leverage the impact of the CSOs’ role in public affairs. By involving CSOs at the national level, the LGP could demonstrate that activism was coming from all across the country and could use such gatherings as the starting point for building national CSOs, either as independent organizations or as federations of locally based groups. Such a process of CSO development often starts from the top down, usually in capital cities, but the LGP’s subnational governance mandate gave it the opportunity to try to build CSO development from the bottom up.

The LGP’s use of national and regional conferences boosted the energy and capabilities of CSO members, and many came forward to present their organization’s mission and accomplishments. At these conferences, CSO representatives also presented



their organization's views and opinions regarding the specific issues being discussed, e.g., Resolution 137, on the introduction of Islamic Law; the representation of women in the Transitional National Assembly; a legal framework for the establishment and operation of CSOs; and federalism. Moreover, these conferences facilitated networking and exchanges among Iraqi groups, thereby creating opportunities to come together in issue-specific forums and seminars. Events were also held with local CSOs, the media, and local government officials to foster interaction, an exchange of views, and a better understanding of each group's respective roles in a democratic society.

### *Using female local staff to interact with women's CSOs respected local cultural norms*

Iraqi cultural norms provided one of the LGP's early lessons from the program: in general, only female staff are allowed to work with women's groups. Consequently, the LGP arranged program staffing to provide each LGP team with at least one woman per governorate to concentrate on civil society programming, principally with women's groups. The LGP's success in developing the Women's Social and Cultural Society of Al Mawsil attests to the merits of this practice.

*Civil Society Development: Learning from Ninawa* was written by Hind Haider, a civil society specialist working with the LGP in Al Mawsil, and Charles Costello, former Deputy Chief of Party for the LGP, with input from Samuel Taddesse and Derick W. Brinkerhoff.

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